

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

TAZRI'A-M'TZORA 5785

The Biblical phenomenon of the M'tzora has intrigued our Sages, each offering their own unique interpretation. As Ramban expounds, that flesh should erupt with discoloring blemishes and deformities, and clothing should be stained with similar disfiguring patches, clearly points to a metaphysical manifestation. And when unexplained blotches are noticed on the walls of a house, the need for some explanation becomes begging. If these surface appearances defy any rational scientific origin, the Torah's fascination and preoccupation with this subject obviously is coming to teach. Ramban's explanation argues that since the entire halachic topic of Tzaraat is operative only in the Land of Israel, it is the intense concentration of K'dusha of the Land that cannot tolerate any sin. Hence, when a Jew transgresses any of the many sins which precipitates the Tzaraat, the Shechina lifts away with the result that the person's body, clothing and/or home expels the toxicity of the sin outward where it manifests itself as Tzaraat.

As Ramban would have it, the breakout of Tzaraat is actually a blessing for the Jew. While many

have a peculiar tendency to avoid confronting their mistakes and making amends, when the evidence of sin is physically visible as Tzaraat, the misdeed cannot be ignored and must be addressed. Thus, the Torah tells us (D'varim 24:9) to "Remember what HaShem, your Gd, did to Miriam..." Precisely because Miriam was such a great and righteous woman, her hallowed being could not bear even the slightest sin. The result: She was afflicted with Tzaraat. In a word, as Rabb Y.Y. Jacobson put it: "She was too good to be not good."

Addressing this last point, the S'fat Emet (R. Yehuda Leib Alter, 1847-1905) develops a very different and deeply meaningful exposition of the Tzaraat reality. In a number of places in his magisterial Biblical commentary, he presents a Tzaraat theology, as it were, which speaks to the human condition in a way that each of us can relate to.

He begins by observing that although the word, M'TZORA (which refers to the person afflicted with Tzaraat), is generally understood by Chazal as a merger of three words, MOTZI SHEIM RA, one who spreads damaging lies about another, Rav Alter contends that, more accurately, the word is a composite of just two words, MOTZI RA, the ejection of what is RA (evil) from a person. What does this mean?

The word, RA, which is commonly

understood to mean something evil and wicked, also has the denotative meaning of brokenness, fragmentation, instability. As in the broken T'RU'A sound of the shofar, or as in KOTEL RA'U'A, a rickety wall (Bava Kama 21b). Every human life contains a bit of this RA. It finds expression in the anxieties and tensions we experience, the ugly and horrid thoughts and cravings that invade our mind, the failures and hardships we must endure. All this and more fall under the rubric of RA as all that is un-whole, fractured. RA, in essence, speaks to the vulnerability of man, his inherent mortal weakness and hence his proneness to blunder from time to time.

The S'fat Emet then states that so long as this RA is submerged within the larger context of the good, it remarkably serves the good and is thus transformed. Much like the foul smelling CHELB'NA spice which when mixed with the K'TORET (incense) creates a sanctified fragrance, so too when the RA in a person's life is immersed in - and bounded by - the much more abundant TOV, the RA is sublimated and contributes to a greater good. Thus, the great Rebbe of Gur explains the Chazal (B'reishit Rabba 9:7) which surprisingly interprets the Biblical phrase at the end of the Creation chapter, V'HINEI TOV M'OD, (B'reishit 1:31) to refer to the YETZER HARA! What makes RA truly

TOV M'OD, very good, is because those very instabilities of the human condition, those very worrisome, disheartening aspects of daily living, can actually be an impetus and driving force, themselves transmuting and making the already good, TOV M'OD, increasingly better!

But, on the other hand, says the S'fat Emet, if a person is MOTZI RA, which means that he chooses to extricate the RA from the bosom of TOV - from the normative constraints of what is good - then it is that unchecked, unrestrained RA that will become a monster and fiend; what we usually understand RA to be - evil and demonic.

With this explanation, we arrive at a more expansive definition of MOTZI SHEIM RA. Not only is it forbidden to tell lies and slander another, but what is even more injurious are the terrible lies we tell ourselves about ourselves! - the smears that we are losers, just a "piece of garbage". This violation - this beating up upon ourselves - is no less serious and perhaps even more grave than the first!

Indeed, the words that I whisper to myself about myself have the uncanny and powerful ability to define who I am. And should I extract the RA from the context of my immense goodness, I can easily descend, Gd forbid, into the muck of a much greater RA.

To Illustrate: Say a person has suffered a devastating illness, LO ALEINU. He is now debilitated and can no longer function as he once did. RA has invaded his life and upended all of his fondest hopes and dreams. He must now choose. After the initial trauma and blow, he can either detach his RA from the authentic totality of who he is and allow himself to sink into melancholy and depression; psychologically self-medicate and perpetually feel sorry for himself. As the S'fat Emet would have it, he could become a M'TZORA. Or, he can decide - and it would by no means be easy - to assess his physical condition, gather up the RA - the shattered shards of his life - and recreate himself. By placing the RA within his greater religious worldview, a hashkafa which avows and ensures that HaShem still has a job for him, his very misfortune now spurs him on to become what he never thought possible. And, at the end of the day, as so many who've gone through such painful journeys have attested - the Helen Kellers of the world - he discovers that his new-found life is more ennobled and greater than he ever could have imagined. Thus, the RA has indeed become TOV M'OD

To return briefly to our Parsha, another word for Tzaraat is NEGA. My good friend, Rabbi Stewart Weiss references a famous adage about two

words in Hebrew that share the same 3 letters; AYIN, GIMEL, NUN. If you place the AYIN at the end of the word, it spells, NEGA, plague. But if you put the AYIN at the front of the word, it spells, ONEG, pleasure. It all depends where you direct your AYIN - your eye! In terms of the wisdom of the second Gerer Rebbe, it all depends where you place your RA - inside the infinite TOV and purity of your Neshama, or isolate and banish it where it becomes a hell! The choice is ours!

The S'fat Emet concludes by reminding us that when after 120, our souls testify on High as to the worthiness of our lives while in the lower world, the fundamental question will be whether or not we sanctified HaShem by how well we elevated the RA and proved, if only to ourselves, how truly great and exalted we were able to become.

The choice is ours! 🙌